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## DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY

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In academia, there is an increasing focus on gender equality. Research institutions and universities are implementing gender and equality plans that should promote equality in scientific careers and decision-making processes. The European Commission requires that all organisations that apply for research funding, including their partners, need to have a gender equality plan that is approved by the top management. Accordingly, equality is a core value for most academic institutions. Equality entails rules and procedures that ensure that students are assessed in accordance with standards that apply equally for all. In other words, people should be hired for academic positions in accordance with their academic merits, not factors such as social background, gender or ethnicity, and resources such as time and money should be distributed fairly.

However, equality requires more than formal rules to ensure that values such as impartiality and fairness are applied; it also requires an increased focus on how informal power structures, social networks and group-based prejudices play a role in people's opportunity to advance in the system. The slogan today is that gender equality requires a shift from fixing the women to changing the culture. Changing the culture implies measures targeted at changing informal power relations that are maintained by unwritten norms and expectations. Working for gender balance and gender equality calls for an increased focus on how informal norms, practices and power relations create social hierarchies that often place women and minorities in a disadvantaged position. It is precisely because cultural norms and expectations often unconsciously affect how we think, act and assess other people's thinking and actions that changing the culture is so profoundly challenging.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that justice in academia requires an increased focus on how social structures and cultural codes create obstacles to equality. Justice is often considered as the just distribution of resources and goods. Conceptions of distributive justice have, however, been criticised for not hitting

the target when it comes to injustice rooted in social structures and cultural norms. Drawing on Elizabeth Anderson's conception of "democratic equality", which is a relational concept of equality, I argue that remedies for justice in academia should be directed toward cultural and structural features that place women and minorities in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis men. It is, however, important to note that 'equal' is not a synonym for 'identical'. To treat someone equally may involve treating people differently. For that reason, I am not making any substantial distinction between equality and equity.

The first section gives a short definition of the concept of "democratic equality" as a relational concept of equality. Egalitarians who defend a relational approach argue that equality is a matter of equal status in social and political relations. From a relational perspective, gender inequality is seen as a status differentiation rooted in the schemes of interpretation and evaluation, such as, for instance, when cultural codes associated with masculinity are considered as more weighty and significant than cultural codes associated with femininity.<sup>1</sup>

The second section gives an account of the principle of "equality of opportunity", which is a principle for distribution. I explain some of the most important differences between the opportunity account and the relational account. Conceptions of equality are entangled with conceptions of justice. This means that the way we define "equality" is most often defined in line with how justice is conceptualised. If justice is conceptualised as a matter of redistribution, equality is then defined with regard to how sharable goods (e.g., resources or opportunities) should be distributed fairly. If justice is defined as equal status in social relations, equality is then defined in line with moral values that should govern social interactions.

The third section explains the concept of democratic equality. In doing this, I discuss how this account is better suited to counteract structural injustice than the equality of opportunity account. A relational perspective on equality focuses on structural injustice, where injustices are rooted in social status hierarchies. Structural injustice is rooted in formal and informal rules that define power relations and the distribution of resources among groups. It is a matter of norms and habits embedded in our everyday life and therefore different from obvious oppression and discrimination where one group intentionally exploits another.<sup>2</sup> Structural injustice is maintained by people who act within the structure, but the injustice springs out of how the structure works and is therefore not necessarily desired by the people who act within it. I argue that a relational approach is a beneficial approach because it forces us to draw attention to how inequality is structurally anchored and therefore requires remedies that make us able to analyse how formal and informal rules and procedures may reproduce unjustifiable inequalities. Democratic equality is not compatible with social structures that place people in a disadvantaged position due to their group identity and will therefore require a relational perspective on equality. The chapter concludes with a recommendation for DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) workers to integrate both relational and distributive considerations when designing and implementing remedies for promoting equality at the workplace.

## Short definition of democratic equality

A society of equals is a society in which people are recognised as equal participants in the major institutions of society, including workplaces.<sup>3</sup> Democratic equality is a relational concept of equality specified by moral values that should govern social interaction. Following Richard Arneson, a relational conception of equality consists of three ideals: *moral equality*, *equal democratic citizenship* and *justice as adequacy*.<sup>4</sup> Moral equality requires that everyone should be treated with equal moral respect. The ideal *equal democratic citizenship* refers to people's status in social interaction. Status equality exists when we recognise each other's equal right to participate in and influence decisions concerning oneself. Equality also entails that we recognise and accept that our actions, decisions and proposals should be justified in reasons and principles acceptable to others.<sup>5</sup> *Justice as adequacy* claims that every citizen should have the resources needed to participate in social and political life.<sup>6</sup> This means that the redistribution of social and economic resources and goods should occur at the level where every citizen has what they need in order to realise themselves as equal citizens and develop their own talents and skills according to their own level of function and conceptions of the good.<sup>7</sup> In the academic context, justice as adequacy could mean that resources should be distributed in order to bring everyone above a threshold that makes them able to qualify for any position, influence decision-making processes, or promote new methodological approaches or research questions in the production of knowledge. In other words, adequacy requires that people are equal when it comes to the opportunity to conduct research, teach and influence political and administrative decisions. Furthermore, it also means that no one should be hindered by stereotypes, prejudices or informal power hierarchies.

## Democratic equality versus equality of opportunity

### *Equality of opportunity*

Within egalitarian liberal theories, there has been an ongoing debate of whether *equality of opportunity* or *democratic equality* should be the yardstick for justice. Very roughly, the principle of "equality of opportunity" states that everyone should have equal opportunities regardless of morally arbitrary properties such as gender, ethnicity, class, race, disabilities or geographic location. Proponents of the principle of democratic equality argue that the effect of such factors cannot be reduced through redistribution only, but also by actions aimed towards reducing the effect of structural features caused by, for instance, stereotypes and implicit bias.

Most defenders of the principle of the equality of opportunities admit that mere anti-discrimination laws do not sufficiently protect people from being discriminated against on the basis on such properties. As John Rawls noticed in *A Theory of Justice*, "fair equality of opportunity" requires more than a position being formally open to all.<sup>8</sup> In Rawls' own words: "the principle holds that in order to treat all

persons equally, to provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favorable social positions".<sup>9</sup>

Several studies of social inequality show that inequalities are reproduced along axes of social class and ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> It is, for example, more likely that a child of parents with higher education completes a college degree than a child from the working class. Rawls and the post-Rawls egalitarians therefore claim that fair equality of opportunity entails policies for the redistribution of social and economic goods that aim toward reducing the impact that unchosen circumstances may have on people's life and future prospects.<sup>11</sup>

Adapted to academia, the principle of fair equality of opportunity can be applied as a meritocratic principle that claims that people's prospects for an academic career should not be influenced by their social or cultural background, gender or ethnicity, but by their academic merits combined with effort and talent.<sup>12</sup> Without a concern for the different starting points and opportunities that people have in life, and the unspoken norms that nurture inequalities, the meritocratic system will contribute to reinforcing inequalities and could not be justified as fair.

The equality of opportunity approach is often associated with the family of egalitarian theories categorised as "luck egalitarianism". The core idea in these theories is that the distribution of social and economic goods should as far as possible eliminate the effect of unchosen and morally arbitrary factors as gender, ethnicity and disability. Such factors are a matter of chance and not of choice. On the other hand, people have no reason to complain if they are worse off than others due to circumstances for which they are responsible, such as bad decisions.<sup>13</sup>

In academia, the advancement of careers is slower for women than for men.<sup>14</sup> This inequality can be explained with reference to how gender schemes work for both men and women. In academia, as in most workplaces, the distribution and division of labour reflect gendered norms and social expectations. As a result, women still tend, for example, to do more teaching and administrative work than their male colleagues do. This will in turn promote men's careers because they will have more time to do work that is meritorious for advancement. If it is the case that schemes of gendered norms and expectations impede women's careers, it is bad luck to be a woman in academia. A luck egalitarian's potential solution to the problem would be to provide extra resources in order to equalise men and women's opportunity to advance and thereby compensate for the bad luck of being a woman. Several Norwegian universities have implemented special promotion programmes for women who are about to qualify for full professorship. The programmes vary between institutions, but in most cases, they are about giving women extra research time, mentoring and other incentives that are necessary for promotion. Such interventions are mainly justified in the institution's need for gender balance. It makes a quantitative difference on the institutional level, and a qualitative difference on the individual level, but it does not necessarily change the culture. Moreover, special programmes for women can be criticised for missing the target in that they reflect what is commonly referred to as the "fixing the women" approach.<sup>15</sup>

The question why there are fewer women in top positions in academia has been the subject of several studies and discussions for about two decades. Women are still underrepresented at the top, especially in professor positions, and the culture is relatively homogeneous, consisting of mostly white people from the middle class. Gender inequality in academia is often explained by reference to metaphors such as the “glass ceiling” or the “sticky floor”. The glass ceiling metaphor points at the influence of invisible barriers for women’s progression in academia. The obstacles are invisible partly because the formal rules and procedures that promise equal opportunities for men and women are counteracted by informal rules and practices. The “sticky floor” metaphor represents the clustering of women in forms of tasks and work at the bottom of the academic hierarchy, for instance teaching and administrative work that is usually considered less prestigious than research and does not promote one’s career in the same way as research does.<sup>16</sup>

It is, however, important to notice that the equality of opportunity approach in fact provides us with good reasons for why identified hindrances to educational opportunities, choice of career, and positions of power are unjust. Factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexual preferences, race, class and disabilities should not have any effect on these opportunities, and hiring a man for an academic position if he is the best qualified is not unfair. However, it is not always easy to make a clear-cut distinction between chosen and unchosen factors. Redistribution of research time to compensate for the bad luck of being a woman is justified only if we recognise and accept that gendered norms and expectations disadvantage women. If we do not accept this insight, we could argue that it is unfair to give special treatment to women just because they have chosen to take on more responsibility for teaching and administration.<sup>17</sup> It may, however, also be the case that people have chosen not to go for promotion due to their own preferences. Hence, the point is that it is not always easy to make a clear-cut distinction between chosen and unchosen factors. If we understand that almost all inequality is a result of unchosen factors, such as gender, socioeconomic background or culture, we are running the risk of paternalism and undermining people’s rights to make choices due to their own conceptions of the good life.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, if we understand too many inequalities due to choices, we are running the risk of ignoring how sociocultural factors and socialisation have an impact on what we do and become. Ignoring the effect of sociocultural factors will in turn reproduce cultural stereotypes and group-based prejudices that affect people’s opportunities when it comes to education and careers.

### ***Democratic equality – a relational approach***

The equality of opportunity approach has been criticised for placing too narrow a focus on the distribution of dividable material goods, thereby neglecting inequalities rooted and reproduced in structural and cultural patterns in society.<sup>19</sup> A relational approach is considered better when it comes to identifying injustice that is not the result of unfair distribution but structural in the sense that it is rooted in

how the system of rules, norms and expectations disadvantage some groups vis-à-vis others and transmit inequality from one sector to another.

In the ground-breaking article “What Is the Point of Equality?” from 1999, Elizabeth Anderson claims that luck egalitarians have missed the point of equality. According to her, equality is not a matter of what one person has compared to another or compensating persons for bad luck, but a matter of what all persons need in order to be granted equal status as citizens in the political and social life of society.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the aim of egalitarianism is the creation of a society where people are not subject to oppression but positioned equally in relation to one another in the major institutions of that society.<sup>21</sup> A relational concept of equality is incompatible with social hierarchies based on ideas concerning the nature of different genders, classes or ethnicities. A society in which some people, in virtue of their sex, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, have privileged access to positions that give them political power and control is not a society of equals.<sup>22</sup>

Anderson reminds us of the aim of egalitarianism with reference to Iris Marion Young’s “faces of oppression”, which includes marginalisation, status hierarchies, domination, exploitation and cultural imperialism.<sup>23</sup> Although all of these faces are different from each other, they have in common that they are related to groups and that they involve issues of justice beyond distribution.<sup>24</sup> Young does not focus on obvious oppression, such as those cases where one person enslaves another. Her main concern is the kind of oppression that is structural, rather than the result of particular individual actions. Structural oppression is caused by norms, habits and symbols embedded in the social norms and institutional praxis and “the collective consequences of following these norms”.<sup>25</sup> This means that single actors or single actions do not cause this kind of injustice; it is often caused by the aggregated result of many single actions that in themselves are not unjust. Overcoming structural injustice requires changing ideologies, as well as social practices, in which such ideologies are learned and reproduced.<sup>26</sup>

## How to overcome structural injustice?

Claims for democratic equality are not only claims for a more just distribution of divisible goods. They are claims for measures that can counteract structural injustices, for instance measures that can reduce the effect of stereotypes,<sup>27</sup> implicit bias<sup>28</sup> and epistemic injustice.<sup>29</sup> For example, stereotypes are embedded in social structures as reflections of historical patterns of oppression, which still affect current relations between groups.<sup>30</sup> Stereotypes lead to reproducing inequalities that make the advantaged multiply their advantage, and the disadvantaged multiply their disadvantage.<sup>31</sup> Stereotypes work when we make judgments on people, based on prejudices about the identity of people who belong to certain groups. The idea that women are not suited for the hard sciences is a stereotype that may affect the gender balance in STEM fields. The effect of stereotypes could be reduced by, for instance, using female scientists in the field as role models or creating contexts that value women’s contributions. The institution should also facilitate activity that can

contribute to critical thinking of how structural injustice works and how our own biases contribute to maintaining it. As mentioned in the introduction, changing the culture is not an easy task; given the nature of structural injustice, it is important not to blame individuals for the injustice, but to facilitate actions that encourage people to take collective responsibility for the changes. This cannot be done without a critical scrutiny of how the organisation's formal and informal rules and procedures contribute to reproducing unjust gender inequality or exclusion. It is not enough to have a gender equality plan without at the same time focusing on how informal power relations can make it difficult to follow it in practice. This does not mean that individuals are not responsible; each of us should ask how we, in virtue of our positions, contribute to upholding a system that causes injustice and exclusion.

### Summary and recommendations

A society of equals is a society in which each person has the right and the necessary resources to participate in political processes and run for positions that give power to influence laws and public policies.<sup>32</sup> Democratic equality, in the sense that Anderson defines it, forces us to pay attention to how structural injustice systematically reinforces stereotypes that implicitly legitimise discrimination towards women and minorities. The advantage of a relational approach to equality is that it addresses the effect that culture, institutions and policies have on people's opportunities.<sup>33</sup> It forces us to question how we treat others and if our judgments of the works of students and colleges are based on group-based prejudices.

In the case of academia, claims for democratic inequality force us to question policies and formal rules, as well as cultural schemas in which some subjects, research questions or methods are defined as more prestigious than others. If there are many more men than women in a field, for example, we must ask why it is so. We must ask if there are structural features in the academic culture that impede women's access to the discipline and the possibility to assert themselves in the discipline.

The two principles, equality of opportunity and democratic equality, share the aim of eliminating arbitrary conditions for inequality. While luck egalitarians focus on redistribution and compensation for unchosen factors that can affect how one fares, relational egalitarians focus on how injustice is reproduced by social structures in which certain social positions more or less automatically benefit some more than others. Within education (and within academia) equality is most often defined in luck egalitarian terms, particularly because it is relatively easy to adapt to a meritocratic system. People should be assessed on the basis of merits, not arbitrary factors such as gender, class or ethnicity, and relational egalitarians would agree with this. However, relational equality asserts that everyone should have enough resources to realise themselves as equal citizens. This is not possible without the redistribution of material goods, but it does not mean that material goods should be equalised first and status after. These processes are two sides of the same coin.

In my view, it is not necessary to choose between democratic equality and equality of opportunity. Justice needs measures that address both redistribution and cultural changes. In many cases, cultural changes are not possible without spending extra resources on groups that have been marginalised from the so-called majority culture, but spending more money does not necessarily solve the problem; we also need measures aimed towards making different voices equal.

### Questions for discussion

- Discuss if and how justice and meritocracy are compatible.
- What kinds of changes are necessary if we accept democratic equality as a value in academia?
- Discuss how the principles of equality of opportunity and democratic equality are useful in order to develop plans for equality and diversity work in academia.

### Suggestions for further reading

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### Notes

- 1 Fraser 2003
- 2 Parekh 2011, 676
- 3 Anderson 2007, 629
- 4 Arneson 2010
- 5 Anderson 1999, 313
- 6 Arneson 2010, 25
- 7 Anderson 1999, 312
- 8 Sachs, 2012, 323
- 9 Rawls 1999, 86
- 10 United Nations 2020
- 11 Rawls is using the concept “democratic equality” to explain what equality of opportunities means. Elizabeth Anderson claims that her interpretation of the concept of equality is closer to Rawls than luck egalitarian principles (Anderson 1999; Rawls 1999).
- 12 Calvert 2014, 72
- 13 Gheaus 2016, 54
- 14 Virginia Valian argues that well-documented statistics show that women’s advancement in academia compared to men’s is slower (Valian 2005, 198).
- 15 Laursen and Austeen, 2020



- 16 Clavero and Galligan 2019, 1115–16
- 17 See Anderson 1999, 297 for a discussion of how women who tend to be poor because they are taking care of children and dependents can be blamed as responsible for their poverty.
- 18 Anderson 1999
- 19 Anderson 1999, 2007; Young 2006
- 20 Anderson 1999, 313
- 21 Anderson 2007, 620
- 22 Anderson 2007
- 23 Anderson 1999, ; Young 2006
- 24 Young 2006, 4
- 25 Young 2006, 5
- 26 Haslanger 2008, 4
- 27 See Finholt, this volume
- 28 See Berdt-Rasmussen, this volume
- 29 See Reibold, this volume
- 30 Anderson 2007, 605
- 31 Anderson 2007, 601–2
- 32 Arneson 2010, 25
- 33 Gheaus 2016

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